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ABSTRACT

Dropping out of high school is a major concern for the nation. Dropping out of school, although it occurs at a specific moment, is the culmination of a number of factors, including problems from both home and school, and may begin before the at-risk student starts school. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of peer tutoring by university undergraduate students on at-risk 9th-grade students. Ninth graders (N=87) from four eastern Kentucky high schools were selected by their school counselors as being "at risk" of becoming dropouts. Undergraduate tutors received 10 hours of preservice training and thereafter attended weekly training sessions to maintain cohesiveness. Tutors had 5 weeks to develop case studies on each student before starting tutoring sessions. After the case studies were developed, 14 tutoring sessions were conducted in 7 weeks. Each tutor served four high school students. The results suggested that students' self-perceptions regarding their interpersonal relationships with their peers increased significantly in the program, as compared to the control group. That is, students in the program rated their concept of their interpersonal relationships higher than those who were not in the program. Thus it appears that this program was successful in enhancing some of the social and emotional needs of the students, specifically self-concept. (ABL)

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Enhancing Self-esteem of At-risk High School Students

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Enhancing Self-esteem of At-risk High School Students

Dropping out of high school is a major concern for the nation. While the data base regarding dropouts is notoriously unreliable because of differences in definitions and data collection techniques (Pallas, 1986), estimates of dropout rates are about 15% nationally (Stropher, 1986). Although there are problems with the data base, the proportion of students dropping out appears to be fairly constant for the past twenty years, the consequences have become more severe for the individual, his/her family, and society due to changes in the labor market. Dropping out of school, although it occurs at a specific moment, is the culmination of a number of factors, including problems from both home and school, and may begin before the at-risk student starts school.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem, a positive or negative attitude toward oneself, is commonly believed to be a prerequisite for success in school, although research findings are inconsistent (e.g., Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). For example, in a study comparing persistent absentees with their better attending peers, Reid (1984) found a negative correlation between absences and self-

esteem. That is, the lower the self-esteem the higher the absentee rate. Also, in a nine-year study of some 1,600 males in grades 10 to 12, Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston (1978) found the level of general self-esteem for dropouts to be lower than that of those who stayed in school. In addition, dropouts have rated themselves lower in traits such as "vigor", "self-confidence", and "mature personality" than those who stayed in school (Combs & Cooley, 1968). Interestingly, female dropouts rated themselves lower than male dropouts rated themselves. Because most of the studies reviewed by the present authors were correlational, it, therefore, cannot be determined that low self-esteem caused the student to drop out.

Interestingly, other studies have found no difference in self-esteem between dropouts and their cohorts. For example, the High School and Beyond survey of a nationwide sample of sophomores found no difference between those who dropped out and those who graduated two years later (Ekstrom et al, 1986). Also, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that all groups increased in self-esteem from their sophomore year to two years later with overall gain for college bound students no greater than dropouts.

Theories of the development of self-esteem emphasize the influence of "significant others" (Mead, 1934; & Sullivan, 1953), and identifications one

makes with particular groups (Gergan, 1971; & McCarthy & Yancey, 1971). In addition, Muuss' (1982) discussion of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development emphasizes the role of peers in the development of self-esteem. According to this theory, adolescents are at the stage of identity versus role confusion. The task at this stage is to establish a firm sense of who one is. Unfortunately, in periods of rapid social change, adolescents do not perceive the older generation of parents and teachers as useful role models. Thus, adolescents turn to their peer group for feedback and evaluation of themselves, and seem preoccupied with how they are seen by their peers. While the "significant other" at earlier stages may be parents or other adults, there is little doubt that in adolescence it is peers who play a significant role in the development of self-esteem.

Finn (1989) suggests two models to explain the gradual loosening of the bond between child and school leading to dropping out. On the one hand, the Frustration-Self-Esteem model assumes school failure as the cause of early withdrawal from school. Thus, students begin with a desire for school success. When success is unattainable, a cycle of frustration and withdrawal begins. The student is increasingly unsuccessful, further reducing self-esteem

and increasing negative peer influence and problem behavior which leads to less success.

On the other hand, the Participation-Identification model considers an internal factor, "commitment to schooling", as the causal factor for dropping out. The positive outcome is identified by such terms as involvement, attachment, bonding, affiliation, and commitment, and the negative outcome as alienation or withdrawal. Thus, students who feel they belong at school and care about their place there will assume the student role along with its duties. Participation, being on-task, expands for some students to include initiation of questions, and, later, participation in extracurricular activities. The positive cycle includes participation in school activities, successful performance, a sense of identification with school (i.e., a feeling of belonging and valuing), and increased participation. At-risk students, on the other hand, experience school as less relevant to their lives (Finn, 1989).

Mentoring and Tutoring

Tutoring programs in which students teach other students are often proposed as a strategy for improving self-esteem and grades for at-risk students (Smink, 1990). Unfortunately, the results have been inconclusive. For example, in a four month program in which eighth to twelfth grade

volunteers worked with low achieving second through fifth grade students, both tutors and tutees made academic gains but neither group gained significantly in self-esteem (Morgan & Toy, 1970). Other studies, however, report gains in self-esteem in the tutees and often in the tutors as well (e.g., Gardner, 1978; & Stern, 1978). Stern's (1978) study is important to the present study because it utilized college students as tutors of disadvantaged students in their public school.

In addition, researchers have provided employment and undergraduate tutors to foster care youths, ages 12 to 15, as a dropout prevention strategy (Lee, Bryant, Noonan & Plionis, 1987). The results indicated significant grade improvement for one third of the students. Moreover, there was remarkable improvement in attendance in some of these same students. Unfortunately, no pre-post comparisons were reported. Peck, Law, and Mills (1987) recommended that programs should be student-centered. Due to the heterogeneity of causes found among at-risk students, Hahn (1987) recommends a casework approach with specific concern for social and emotional needs. (For details of this approach see Hahn, 1987).) In addition, Vogel (1988) suggested written correspondence as a means of overcoming the resistance of students who feel alienated by schooling.

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of peer tutoring by university undergraduate students on at-risk ninth grade students. It was hypothesized that the relationship with the university students would improve achievement and self-esteem.

Method

Subjects

Ninety-nine ninth graders in four eastern Kentucky high schools were selected by the school counselors as being "at risk" of becoming dropouts; (69 male and 30 female). The students were predominantly low socio-economic status (SES) caucasians; (70 in the experimental and 29 in the control group).

Instruments

The Student Rating Scale (SRS) of the Behavior Rating Profile (BRP) (Brown & Hammill, 1983) was used to measure self-perceptions of behavior. The BRP was chosen because it provides information from teachers and parents. However, only the results of the SRS are reported in this study. It includes three self-ratings covering their self-perceptions of their status at home, at school and with their peers. Test-retest reliability is reported at 0.78 (home), 0.83 (school), and 0.86 (peer) (Brown & Hammill, 1983). The authors report intercorrelations among the BRP scales in a normal group of

students between .68 and .88, which suggests the construct validity of the BRP.

Procedure

Undergraduate tutors were selected by responding to advertisements. Tutors received 10 hours of pre-service training and thereafter attended weekly one and a half hour training sessions for 11 weeks to maintain cohesiveness, morale and skills. They were paid four dollars per hour for their participation in this program.

Tutors had five weeks to develop case studies on each student before starting tutoring sessions. These case studies included family background, school history, emotional, social, physical and interest information. This involved visiting with students and teachers at school, studying cumulative files, and making a home visit to complete the studies using a structured format. Tutors then identified major issues and goals for each student.

After the case studies were developed, 14 tutoring sessions were conducted in seven weeks. Tutors served four high school students. They worked with the students for two one-hour sessions each week. During the program, tutors sent four letters to each student at their home and hosted a visit to the university to enhance the tutor-tutee relationship. Teacher-

coordinators were asked to collect four letters from each tutee to be sent to the tutors at school. Tutors wrote a summarizing letter to parents at the end of the program.

The Behavior Rating Profile (BRP) was administered before the program started and four months later at the end of the program. Grade point averages (GPAs) were collected at the end of the eighth and ninth grades.

Results

Due to missing data on several variables, 87 students from three schools were used in the data analysis. Regression analyses using the general linear model were performed with difference scores between pre- and post-tests of the home, school and peer subscales of the BRP as the dependent variables, and groups and schools as the independent variables.

The analyses indicated that there were no significant differences between groups in BRP scores on the home and school subscales. However, there was a significant difference on the peer subscale, F (1,2) = 7.79, p = .007, indicating that the students' self-perceptions about their interpersonal relationships with their peers improved in the treatment group.

Insert Table 1 about here

Regarding achievement, initial inspection of GPAs shows a slight decrease in GPA. Perhaps this decrease occurred because these at-risk students went from eighth to ninth grade where the coursework was more difficult. Further, an analysis of variance indicated no significant differences in GPA between the groups.

Insert Table 2 about here

The results of the present study suggest that students' self-perceptions regarding their interpersonal relationships with their peers increased significantly in the program, as compared to the control group. That is, students in the program rated their concept of their interpersonal relationships higher than those who were not in the program. Thus, it appears that this program was successful in enhancing some of the social and emotional needs of the students; specifically, self-concept.

Erikson's (1950, cited in Muuss, 1982) theory suggests that adolescents are in a stage of development when peers play a significant role in the development of identity. Perhaps, if the students in this study did not perceive more esteem from parents and teachers it is because attention is focused on

peers at this age. At any rate, improvment in this area is important and may be the most important factor at this stage of development.

Finn's (1989) Participation-Identification model emphasizes the internal feeling of belonging and being a part of school. The acceptance and affirmation given the students by the college tutors in the present study could have been perceived as a validation of their self-worth. That is, self-esteem appeared to improve because of the influence of a powerful and socially competent "super peer". This feeling may generalize to their peers by reasoning that "if they (tutors) hold me in high esteem, then surely I'm acceptable to lower ranking peers." (Authors' quotes.) Perhaps also, the college tutors, feeling a duty toward the self-improvement of their proteges, were able to provide subtle cues about changes needed to make the tutees more socially acceptable.

Further, Finn's (1989) Frustration-Self-Esteem model focuses on school success. Certainly grade improvement is critical to any definition of school success for low achieving students. However, grades reflect the accumulated effects of effort and ability over long periods of time. That is, knowledge, once acquired, is useful in gaining more knowledge. The program studied was implemented over the first fourteen weeks of the second semester of high

school and thus may have been too late or too short to salvage grades for students who may be hopelessly behind.

While there is general agreement (e.g., Morgan & Toy, 1970) that peer tutoring can improve academic performance, the effects on self-esteem are less clear. It is possible that combining case study, letter writing, and other "whole child" strategies in a concentrated effort is more likely to improve self-esteem than strategies that view improvement of self-esteem as merely a desirable by-product of tutoring. this raises an interesting question, however, since this study did not produce the expected achievement gains. Perhaps the all out effort with self-esteem detracted from the academic objective, even though GPAs may not be valid indicators of academic performance. Can the two objectives be reliably attained with a better balance of effort? Analysis of data from the second year of this program may shed some light on this issue.

In conclusion, this study suggests that providing college tutor-mentors for at-risk high school students in a program that emphasizes personal improvement can increase self-esteem. This, in turn, may decrease the chances of at-risk students dropping out of high school. Because the sample of rural students was selected by guidance counselors, the results should not be generalized to other populations.

Authors' Notes

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Table 1

Differences in Peer Scores between Groups and Schools

Source	DF	SS	F
Group (G)	1	37.8362	7.79*
School (S)	2	3.7139	.38
G X S	2	5.7943	.60
Error	81	393.4763	---
Total	86	441.9540	---

Note: *p = .007

Table 2

Minimum and Maximum GPA Value

Pre- and Post-treatment

GPA	n*	Minimum Value	Maximum Value
Pre	57	54	89
Post	55	64	87

*Note: Smaller ns due to missing values.